

# ASIA IN THE BALANCE

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## TRANSFORMING US MILITARY STRATEGY IN ASIA

BY THOMAS G. MAHNKEN

WITH DAN BLUMENTHAL, THOMAS DONNELLY,  
MICHAEL MAZZA, GARY J. SCHMITT,  
AND ANDREW SHEARER



A PROJECT OF THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE

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Cover image: The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and escort ships exercise in the Bay of Bengal. US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class James R. Evans.

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To explore the challenges discussed in this report and to seek novel solutions, we conducted a two-day Asia Strategy Retreat in October 2010. The depth of knowledge and amount of creativity evidenced by the retreat's participants—who hailed from the US military, public policy research, academic, and defense industry communities—were truly impressive (though, admittedly, not surprising). We thank these individuals for their time and contributions, from which this report benefited greatly.

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## Executive Summary

Since the end of World War II, the United States has developed a characteristic approach to protecting its interests in Asia. In peace and in war, the US position in Asia has rested on a set of alliances, ground and air forces deployed on allied and US territory, nuclear-strike forces, and carrier-strike groups operating in the Western Pacific. But China has been working systematically to undermine the American approach to assurance, deterrence, and warfighting.

Specifically, China's military modernization, if it continues apace, may allow it to decouple America's allies from the US extended nuclear deterrent, to destroy US and allied fixed bases in the region, and to threaten US power projection forces. This, in turn, could allow China to coerce US allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region, hold US forces at arm's length, and control the seas along the Asian periphery.

The United States faces three fundamental strategic alternatives as it seeks to match its ends and its means in an increasingly turbulent environment. The first strategic alternative is to continue America's current approach to the region—that is, to pursue broad objectives even as the military balance shifts against the United States. The second alternative, favored by neo-isolationists in both US political parties, would be to scale back US commitments and to accept a narrower definition of America's role in the world than the nation has played for the better part of a century.

A third and more favorable approach would be to adopt a forward-leaning strategy that would balance the need to reduce the vulnerability of US forces while maintaining US commitments. It would incorporate a mixture of forward-based and standoff capabilities that would reclaim the military advantages the United States has long enjoyed and

that have become essential to American strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, to reduce operational risk and to avoid sacrificing America's strategic interests, a forward-leaning strategy would feature greater specialization than does today's posture between “presence” forces for keeping the peace and those for fighting wars.

Such a forward-leaning and forward-looking strategy for Asia would rest upon two pillars: an effort to conduct a long-term competition with China in peacetime and measures to convince China that it cannot fight and win a quick regional war. Essential to both pillars will be expanding contributions from allied and friendly states. The United States is not the only state involved in the Asia-Pacific region that has reason to be concerned by its changing military balance. Other powers are concerned and have in fact already begun to respond. The United States needs to work closely with those powers to forge an integrated and effective response.

Finally, in a period of limited and increasingly constrained defense resources, the United States needs to be looking for defense options that promise especially high leverage in the context of the changing military balance in the Asia-Pacific region. Four such options stand out: developing a coalition intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) network in the Western Pacific; bolstering allied undersea warfare; expanding the range of bases open to the United States; and enhancing nuclear deterrence.

Complacency in the face of growing threats to US interests in the Asia-Pacific region will increase rather than decrease the possibility of conflict. The region's evolving security environment requires that America's military strategy evolve as well. America's future peace and prosperity will depend on it.





SOURCE: [www.maps.com](http://www.maps.com)

## The Strategic Context

Asia's global strategic weight is growing. The Obama administration's announcement of a "Pacific pivot," codified in the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, is evidence of this development:

U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly, while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, *we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.*<sup>1</sup>

However, recognition of the increasing importance of Asia and calls for an expansion of US presence in the region date back at least a decade to the 2001 *Quadrennial Defense Review*.<sup>2</sup>

These policy pronouncements—which span presidential administrations—are testimony to the fact that a favorable balance of power in Asia is essential to protecting vital American interests. Although presidential administrations may use different words to convey US objectives in Asia, history demonstrates remarkable continuity in behavior. Although the process of reorienting US strategy to place greater emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region has been underway for some time, the United States must do more to translate rhetoric into reality. Doing so will be particularly challenging given current constraints on defense spending.

As in the past, US strategy in the Asia-Pacific region rests on military power. For decades, the United States has pursued a consistent set of objectives in the Asia-Pacific region. Defending American lives and property is one of the most fundamental

responsibilities of the US government. The United States also looks to its military to help protect US allies from attack or coercion by aggressive neighbors. The military also seeks to deter aggression by competitors. But reassurance and deterrence ultimately require credible combat power and a strategy for employing that power. If the credibility of US military power is called into question, then America's allies will doubt the country's commitment to helping defend those allies and competitors will be tempted to take action.

Several challenges have begun to undermine US commitment to stability in Asia. The most consequential of these is the growth of China's power and its military modernization, which threaten not only to deny the United States access to areas of vital national interest, but also to erode the alliances that have served as the foundation of regional stability for over half a century.

A second challenge arises from North Korea's communist regime, which has historically engaged in wildly provocative rhetoric and, often, aggressive behavior. Since 2006, North Korea has tested two nuclear weapons and conducted three flight tests of long-range missiles. The country is also a proliferator of weapons technology—the most egregious example of this being its sale of a nuclear reactor to Syria.

North Korea's provocative actions are not limited to weapons tests alone. The country's government is responsible for sinking the South Korean naval vessel *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010, killing forty-six crewmen. Pyongyang, North Korea, is also responsible for shelling Yeonpyeong Island, South Korea, in May 2011, injuring sixteen soldiers and three civilians and leaving four dead.

If the North Korean regime is bellicose, however, it is also weak. Looking forward, the United States

and its allies may face not only additional North Korean provocation, but also the prospect of North Korean instability and collapse. This situation would then necessitate a stability and humanitarian operation that could require nearly half a million ground forces—primarily South Koreans enabled by significant US ground, air, and maritime support—to execute successfully.<sup>3</sup>

A third threat to US dominance in the Asia-Pacific region stems from America's fiscal condition. To meet deficit reduction goals set out in the Budget Control Act of 2011, the Obama administration plans to cut

\$487 billion from the US Department of Defense (DOD) over the next decade. If the act is not amended, the Pentagon will face an additional \$500 to \$600 billion in mandated reductions over the fiscal years 2013–2021 compared to projected levels. These cuts will greatly reduce the ability of the United States to pursue its historical aims in Asia.

These myriad challenges raise a fundamental question: can the United States continue to ensure a favorable security environment in the Asia-Pacific region in the twenty-first century, and, if so, how might this be accomplished?



## Methodology

In examining the need for a new US strategy for the Asia-Pacific region, we have taken two complementary approaches. The first is a regional examination of the military balance in Northeast Asia, the South China Sea, South Asia, and continental Asia. This assessment shows that the military balance has shifted in a direction unfavorable to the United States and its allies in Northeast Asia. It also reveals warning signs in the South China Sea. At the same time, a regional assessment reveals opportunities for the United States in South Asia and perhaps in continental Asia.

The second approach involves examining the adequacy of US strategy across the spectrum of conflict areas. We examined the ability of US forces to reassure allies and to deter adversaries in peacetime, to compete over the long term, and to fight and win in a range of scenarios should war occur. This assessment shows that US forces are increasingly vulnerable in ways that undermine their ability to carry out these tasks.

We conclude that a struggle between the United States and China is underway for mastery of the Asia-Pacific region. The course and outcome of this struggle will be vital to the security of the United States, its allies, and other nations in the region. Moreover, US strategy and forces are insufficient to meet current and emerging challenges. We argue that the United States should posture itself for a long-term peacetime competition with China.

In the case of war, the United States and its allies should be prepared for a protracted and costly conflict. Preparing for this possibility is the best guarantee that the United States can avoid waging such a war. Moreover, the United States must remain on guard against North Korean aggression while taking into account the possible necessity for a post-conflict, post-Kim Jong-un stability operation.

To wage a long-term peacetime competition with China and to be prepared for war, the United States must formulate and implement a “forward-leaning” strategy to protect its interests in Asia. Key elements of that strategy are: developing new approaches to presence in the region, strengthening that presence to reassure allies and to deter aggression, and adopting a “cost-imposition” strategy on China.<sup>4</sup>

This report begins by describing America’s enduring interests in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the strategy the United States has pursued for more than half a century to protect those interests. It goes on to describe the challenges to that strategy in peace and war. It likewise provides a regional assessment of the military balance in Northeast Asia, the South China Sea, South Asia, and Continental Asia, and explores potential conflict scenarios. It weighs strategic alternatives to meet US objectives over the long term, and then describes the elements of a forward-leaning strategy to protect US interests in Asia over an extended period of time.

## Enduring US Interests in Asia

The US government frequently does a poor job of articulating its interests in public statements. Recent national security strategies—as well as the Obama administration’s recent defense guidance white paper—tend to speak in general terms. Rather than outlining a limited and prioritized set of objectives, they often contain undifferentiated lists of desirable ends. Rather than discussing particular countries that threaten US interests, they tend to speak of challenges in only the vaguest of terms.

One should, therefore, look to the practice of US national security policy for an understanding of enduring US interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Since at least World War II, the United States has pursued a consistent set of objectives in the area. First and foremost, the United States has acted to defend its own territory. This territory includes the continental United States, Hawaii, Alaska, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands. America is also bound by treaty to protect American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau.

Second, the United States is committed by treaty to protect its allies. In the Asia-Pacific region, these allies include Australia, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. Moreover, the Taiwan Relations Act (1979) requires the US government to

provide both arms and services of a defensive nature to Taiwan and to maintain US military capacity to help Taiwan resist coercion from China.<sup>5</sup>

Third, the United States has for decades guaranteed access to the global commons (maritime, air, outer space, and cyberspace) in peacetime and has worked to command them in wartime. Command of the commons has also benefited other nations besides the United States, none more so than China. The free flow of goods, services, and information has undergirded economic growth and prosperity for decades. It has helped lift millions of people out of poverty and has made globalization possible.

Finally, the United States has—for the past century—sought to preserve a favorable balance of power across Eurasia. The United States has repeatedly used force when its territory or allies were attacked and when a would-be hegemon has challenged the balance of power in Eurasia. On two occasions, the United States intervened in European affairs when Germany threatened to dominate the continent. America similarly stymied Japan’s attempt at achieving hegemony in the Pacific in the mid-twentieth century. Then, during the Cold War, the United States sought to prevent the Soviet Union from becoming a Eurasian hegemon. US defense planning after the fall of the Soviet Union only perpetuated this pattern.<sup>6</sup>

## The Mounting Challenge to the United States in Asia

Since the end of World War II, the United States has developed a characteristic approach to protecting its interests in Asia. In peacetime and in war, the US position in Asia has been characterized by a set of alliances, ground and air forces deployed on allied and US territory, nuclear strike forces, and carrier-strike groups operating in the Western Pacific. The United States has deployed ground and air forces on allied territory in Japan and South Korea as well as on US territory (Hawaii, Alaska, and Guam) to reassure allies and to deter adversaries.

During the Cold War, this included placing nuclear weapons on US Navy ships and allied territory

as an extended nuclear deterrent. The United States has also routinely deployed US Navy carrier-strike groups (see figure 1) in the Western Pacific to demonstrate US presence, reassure allies, and deter aggressors. This characteristic approach has likewise included a willingness to deploy soldiers and marines onto the continent to conduct combat operations when deterrence has failed.

America's approach to demonstrating its presence, reassuring allies, and deterring aggressors in peacetime now largely mirrors its concept of operations in wartime. That is, the United States uses its most powerful naval assets (its carrier groups) as

FIGURE 1



A US Navy Carrier-Strike Group. Source: US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Scott Pittman.

FIGURE 2



**The Littoral Combat Ship USS Freedom (LCS-1). Source: US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Aaron Burden.**

instruments of peacetime presence, assurance, and deterrence. In war, these forward-deployed naval forces serve as instruments of power projection.

It is worth noting that such a posture represents a historical novelty. Traditionally, sea powers—whether Britain in the eighteenth through twentieth centuries or the United States prior to World War II—relied on small warships such as frigates to show the flag and to coerce adversaries. They kept their most powerful ships in home waters to train and prepare for a decisive fleet battle. Today, the United States faces the dual challenge of not having sufficient naval forces for peacetime missions as well as

relying upon increasingly vulnerable ships for both peacetime and wartime missions.

There is a danger that the vulnerability of US forces (and responses to this vulnerability) will undermine the credibility of America's security commitment to the Asia-Pacific region. This is compounded by the fact that alternatives for demonstrating US presence—such as the Littoral Combat Ship (see figure 2)—have limited military capabilities, whereas some of the most potent strike platforms—such as nuclear attack submarines (SSNs)—may have limited value as instruments of presence and reassurance due to their inherent stealth.

## The Chinese Challenge

China has been working systematically to undermine the American approach to assurance, deterrence, and warfighting. Specifically, China's military modernization lends it the ability to decouple America's allies from the US extended nuclear deterrent, to destroy US and allied fixed bases in the Asia-Pacific region, and to threaten US power projection forces. This, in turn, could allow China to coerce US allies and friends in the region (regarding territorial disputes, for example), hold US forces at arm's length, and control the seas along the Asian periphery.

It is important to understand the scope and pace of Chinese military developments. There is, on the one hand, the danger of overestimating the extent of Chinese military modernization—of crediting China with capabilities that it does not possess. Overestimation would increase the likelihood of an unnecessary arms race in the Asia-Pacific region. However, underestimating Chinese military modernization is also dangerous. Doing so could set the grounds for an unexpected shift in the balance of power in the region or make the United States and other Asia-Pacific regional actors vulnerable to surprise in the event of a future crisis or conflict.

It is increasingly apparent that the United States has underestimated the scope and pace of Chinese military modernization.<sup>7</sup> Former secretary of defense Robert Gates admitted as much in January 2011 after the appearance of the stealthy J-20 fifth-generation combat aircraft.<sup>8</sup> Gates's remarks mirrored those of Vice Admiral Jack Dorsett—at the time the US Navy's senior intelligence officer—who has stated that the DOD “certainly would not have expected [the Chinese] to be as far along as they are today” in technology and has argued that the Pentagon needs to refine its intelligence on military matters in China.<sup>9</sup> For his

part, the then-commander of US Pacific Command, Admiral Robert F. Willard, US Navy, told reporters in October 2009:

In the past decade or so, China has exceeded most of our intelligence estimates of their military capability and capacity, every year. . . . They've grown at an unprecedented rate in those capabilities. And, they've developed some asymmetric capabilities that are concerning to the region, some anti-access capabilities and so on.<sup>10</sup>

### Decoupling US Allies from Extended Nuclear Deterrent

China's military modernization—particularly that of its nuclear forces—threatens to decouple US allies from America's extended nuclear deterrent. As previously mentioned, the United States is bound by treaty to defend Australia, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. Part of the US defense commitment includes the pledge to use nuclear weapons in defense of allies. For example, as Gates stated in October 2009:

North Korea continues to pose a threat to South Korea, to the region, and to others. . . . And as such, I want to reaffirm the unwavering commitment of the United States to the alliance and to the defense of the Republic of Korea (ROK). The United States will continue to provide extended deterrence, using the full range of military capabilities including the nuclear umbrella to ensure ROK security.<sup>11</sup>



Japan also requested that the United States reaffirm its extended deterrence guarantee in the wake of North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile tests.<sup>12</sup>

But it is China, rather than North Korea, which poses the greater threat to that guarantee. China's propensity for secrecy and deception has raised questions among some analysts regarding the actual size of the country's nuclear arsenal.<sup>13</sup> China has invested heavily—for decades—in tunneling and underground facilities to conceal, among other things, its nuclear missile force.<sup>14</sup> Although it remains unclear whether these underground facilities conceal a larger arsenal of Chinese missiles and nuclear weapons than previously estimated, China is undeniably increasing the size and survivability of its "known" nuclear force.

According to the DOD's annual report to Congress on Chinese military developments, China's nuclear arsenal currently consists of approximately fifty-five to sixty-five intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), including: the silo-based CSS-4 (DF-5), the solid-fueled, road-mobile CSS-10 Mods 1 and 2 (DF-31 and DF-31A), and the more limited range CSS-3 (DF-3).<sup>15</sup> China also possesses four brigades of nuclear-armed intermediate- and medium-range ballistic missiles for regional nuclear strike missions. These include CSS-2 intermediate-range ballistic missiles and road-mobile, solid-fueled CSS-5 (DF-21C) medium-range ballistic missiles.<sup>16</sup>

China is currently deploying additional solid-fuel, road-mobile DF-31As and is enhancing the DF-5. China may also be developing a mobile ICBM with multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles. Finally, China is deploying the Jin-class nuclear ballistic missile submarine, armed with the JL-2 (CSS-NX-4) submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).<sup>17</sup>

The United States, on the other hand, is reducing its nuclear arsenal. The US stockpile of nuclear weapons has decreased more than 75 percent since the Berlin Wall fell in late 1989.<sup>18</sup> In accordance with the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, the United States will further reduce its strategic nuclear

force to 1,550 deployed warheads. It will similarly allow for no more than seven hundred deployed ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and nuclear-equipped heavy bombers. The Obama administration is reportedly examining even more extensive cuts to the US nuclear arsenal, including one option of cutting it by 80 percent.<sup>19</sup>

Of greater relevance to America's extended nuclear deterrence commitments is the fact that the country eliminated approximately 90 percent of its nonstrategic nuclear weapons between 1991 and 2009. The Obama administration's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review went further, eliminating the nuclear version of the Tomahawk cruise missile, which the Japanese government saw as an essential element in the US extended nuclear deterrence guarantee.<sup>20</sup>

The buildup of Chinese nuclear forces—combined with the depletion of American nuclear forces—means that in a future crisis, the United States will have more limited options for containing escalation, a condition which may deter the United States from intervening in a crisis. In addition, the increasing vulnerability of America's remaining tactical nuclear delivery platforms could lead to reluctance to deploy them. It could likewise spur the development of more adventuresome Chinese military strategies.

In sum, the nuclear policies and force posture of the Obama administration overwhelmingly discount China's more modern and numerous nuclear capabilities. Through its desire to abolish nuclear weapons and its excessive focus on arms control negotiations with Russia, the administration is damaging America's deterrent capabilities, which have historically been the keystone of the Asian balance of power and regional stability.

### **Destroying Fixed Targets in the Asia-Pacific Region**

The United States relies heavily on ports, airfields, and logistical sites along the Asian littoral zone to support its peacetime presence, to reassure allies,



and to deter aggression. In war, these locations would serve as forward-operating bases for US combat forces. These include key sites in Japan, South Korea, and US territories in the Western Pacific.

These bases are increasingly vulnerable. China continues to deploy large numbers of precision-guided ballistic and cruise missiles. According to one DOD estimate, China has between seventeen and eighteen SRBM and medium-range ballistic missile brigades with between 1,300 and 1,800 ballistic and cruise missiles for land attack. These missiles include four nuclear and ten conventional variants. In March 2012, photos emerged of what may be a new Chinese intermediate-range ballistic missile that could reach Guam.<sup>21</sup> In addition to ballistic missiles, China has deployed between 300 and 350 launchers for its missiles, most of which are mobile.<sup>22</sup>

In a time of war, it is increasingly likely that Chinese missiles would be able to shut down operations on Taiwanese airfields, preventing Taiwan from controlling the Taiwan Strait. These missiles could also shut down US airfields in Japan, preventing the United States from supporting Taiwan.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, such capabilities would do much to influence US and allied decision making in a crisis short of conflict.

### **China's Threat to US Power Projection Forces**

China is also becoming increasingly capable of threatening America's ability to project military force in East Asia. The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) development of the DF-21D antiship ballistic missile—which could give China the ability to strike ships up to 1,500 kilometers from China's shores—has received considerable attention.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, it is possible that China will develop even longer-range systems in the future.<sup>25</sup> China's development of anti-access and area denial systems goes far beyond the DF-21. The country is deploying increasingly capable diesel and nuclear attack submarines armed with antiship cruise missiles, surface combatants with advanced anti-air and antiship missiles, and maritime strike aircraft armed with antiship cruise missiles to engage surface combatants.<sup>26</sup>

And the numbers matter, too. Even if Chinese submarines, for example, never achieve the kind of sophistication common to US or allied boats, there is a growing prospect that a "swarm" of PLA attack submarines—possibly in combination with ballistic missile boats—could overwhelm US and regional antisubmarine defenses in the early moments of a conflict or crisis, or in critical locations over a longer period of time.

## Regional Assessment

What do these trends portend for the military balance in Asia? In Northeast Asia, the military balance has shifted in a direction unfavorable to the United States and its allies. Consequently, the United States increasingly needs to bolster its presence in the Asia-Pacific region, to reassure its allies, and to deter China and North Korea.

Over the past two years, competing sovereignty claims in the South China Sea have received considerable attention. Member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations share a common worry about Chinese naval provocations. During a recent standoff in disputed waters, Philippine Foreign Secretary Albert del Rosario warned that “all [nations], not just the Philippines will be negatively affected if we do not take a stand.” In comments directed at Washington, DC, he continued: “Since the freedom of navigation and unimpeded commerce in the [South China Sea] are of great import to many nations, all should consider what China is endeavoring to do in the Scarborough Shoal.”<sup>27</sup>

Of particular concern is China’s buildup of naval capabilities. This buildup—at a minimum—will complicate America’s ability to ensure freedom of the seas in this strategic sea, and could eventually be used to deny access to other states. In this case, it is in America’s best interest to help Southeast Asian states strengthen their capacity to resist Chinese coercion.

China’s interests in the South China Sea are driven by two overriding factors: first, the ability to tap into what the Chinese perceive to be the South China Sea’s abundant natural resources and, second, the

desire to control its maritime southern “back door.” The United States and its allies have the opportunity to complicate China’s goal of gaining security in adjacent waters by responding to this challenge.

In recent years, China has become increasingly interested in South Asia. Alongside preexisting tensions between countries, this interest is producing an emerging multiplayer competition involving India, Pakistan, China, and the United States. It would be advantageous for the United States to (1) assist India as the country’s capital of New Delhi seeks to modernize the nation’s military, and to (2) forge ties between and among India, Australia, Japan, and the United States.

On the Asian continent, there has been a remarkable absence of great power competition. Indeed, China’s peaceful continental borders have facilitated Beijing’s maritime expansion. Moving forward, the United States should strive to improve its ties with Central Asia and Mongolia to the extent that this is diplomatically and militarily feasible.

The United States should also work to minimize the areas of cooperation between Russia and China, particularly as China emerges as the more powerful of the two states and can more easily put pressure on Russia (considering its diminishing military power and crippling demographic problems). While Russia is not a likely counterweight to China or an attractive partner for America, a Russian government that is less helpful to China out of concern for its own long-term interests in Eurasia can benefit American strategy in Asia.

## Strategic Alternatives

The United States faces three strategic alternatives (see table 1) as it seeks to align its ends with its means in an increasingly turbulent environment. In evaluating these options, it is crucial to assess the risks and rewards of each one. Moreover, it is useful to differentiate among different types of risk. For example, the United States should, first and foremost, seek to minimize *strategic* risk—that is, safeguard its political objectives and interests. It should also, however, seek to reduce *operational* risk—that is, safeguard its military forces. An ideal strategy would seek to minimize both.

The first strategic alternative for the United States is to continue its current approach to the Asia-Pacific region—in essence, to pursue broad objectives even as the military balance shifts against the country. We believe this to be inadvisable, because by relying on increasingly vulnerable, forward-based forces for reassurance and deterrence, the United States would incur additional risk. Moreover, as the size of the US Navy decreases, it will be increasingly difficult to maintain an American presence across the region. As a result, a “straight-line” continuation of America’s current posture in the region will eventually lead to progressively greater strategic and operational risk.

The United States could take some steps to reduce the risk to its forward-based forces and to increase the credibility of its commitment to allies. These steps range from hardening military bases against attack and diversifying the US basing infrastructure to the renuclearization of the US force posture in the Pacific and the articulation of “red lines” for US nuclear weapons use. Such measures are, however, expensive or politically problematic. Furthermore, they may provide only temporary operational relief. Such an approach might complicate China’s calculations for a time and would allow the United States to “share the risks” among allies. But, in actuality, it would simply increase risks for all.

The second alternative—favored by neo-isolationists in both political parties—would be to scale back US commitments and to accept a narrower definition of America’s role in the world than had been played for much of the twentieth century.<sup>28</sup> Such a strategy would have the United States pull back from the Asian littoral zone and rely on allies to shoulder a greater portion of the load. This would require America to husband its resources against the possible emergence of a true competitor—which, in

TABLE 1  
US STRATEGIC ALTERNATIVES

<b>Current Strategy</b>	• Bluff, accept additional risk
<b>Offshore Balancing</b>	• Reduce operational risk, accept greater strategic risk
<b>Forward-Leaning Strategy</b>	• A mix of forward-based and standoff capabilities as well as forces for keeping peace and fighting war

Source: Authors

reality, can be only China—or a military conflict that directly jeopardizes core American interests.

The Obama administration's strategy sits somewhere between these two approaches: it envisions a scaled-back American posture and incurs greater risk without fully outlining the nature and magnitude of those risks. Perhaps not surprisingly, some advocates of offshore balancing have embraced the administration's strategy, seeing it not as the strong commitment the White House advertises but as a "realist" retrenchment.<sup>29</sup>

Reducing commitments is, however, easier said than done. To begin with, there is no option to reduce the commitment to American territories in the Pacific. Protecting the United States against attack is one of the US government's most fundamental responsibilities—"trading ground" might seem like a clever strategic option, but not if the ground to be traded is American sovereign territory.

Similarly, the United States would lose more than it would gain by abrogating any number of treaties that commit the country to the defense of allies across the globe. America's failure to continue to command the commons or to protect like-minded

East Asian democracies—even those not tied by formal treaties—would incur great economic, political, and military costs.

Offshore balancing would, in other words, trade lessened operational risk for increased strategic risk. It moreover reflects a sense of defeatism that is unwarranted. Although complacency would be unwise, it would be misguided to argue that the only or best option for the United States is to reduce its commitments in Asia.

A third strategic alternative would be to adopt a forward-leaning strategy that would reduce the vulnerability of US forces while maintaining US commitments. This would entail a mixture of forward-based and standoff capabilities that would reclaim the military advantages the United States has long enjoyed and that are essential to American strategy in Asia. Moreover, to reduce operational risk and to refrain from sacrificing America's strategic interests, a forward-leaning strategy would be more specialized than America's current posture between "presence" forces for keeping the peace and those for fighting wars.

## Essential Elements of a Forward-Leaning Strategy

A forward-leaning and forward-looking US strategy for Asia would rest on two pillars: willingness to engage in long-term competition with China in peacetime and measures to convince China that it cannot fight and win a quick regional war. Success in this long-term peacetime competition with China would blunt the momentum of Chinese military modernization and channel Chinese resources away from the country's most disruptive capabilities.<sup>30</sup> To do this, the United States needs to take three steps.

First, the United States needs to develop new approaches to presence. US military force structure in the Asia-Pacific region should move away from overdependence on aircraft carriers and toward networks of capable surface ships as the most visible symbol of US presence in the region. To put it bluntly, the cost of presence is currently too high. The United States should also continue to bolster its submarine fleet in the Pacific. Linking these combatants together will require resilient intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and robust command, control, and communications networks. This, in turn, will require the ability to exploit outer space and cyberspace.

Second, the United States will need to maintain presence in the Western Pacific to reassure allies and to deter aggression. However, America will need to enhance that presence to make it more survivable and, thus, credible. The United States should, for example, harden and diversify its bases in the region. These should include bases on sovereign US territory (such as Hawaii and Guam), on allied territory (such as Japan and South Korea), and, to the extent possible, on the territory of friendly states that would allow US forces easier access to the South China Sea and South and Southeast Asia.

Bases on US territory provide continuous, guaranteed access to facilities for American forces, whereas those on allied territory provide extended deterrence and reassurance. Furthermore, the United States must take the mandate to “build partner capacity” in Asia more seriously, making energetic efforts to accelerate the military modernization of allies and potential coalition partners. Multi-national programs such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program are not just a way to share the costs of new systems but to build a de facto coalition from the inside out; defense industrial policy is a critical form of diplomacy. The US military should seriously consider the ability to share systems with Asian militaries when handling its own investments. Only rarely should the United States build a weapon such as the F-22 Raptor aircraft that will not be made available to allies.

Third, the United States should adopt approaches to levy costs on China. China's military modernization is currently imposing significant costs on the United States and its allies. For example, the United States needs to make considerable investments to counter China's deployment of precision-guided conventional missiles, including its antiship ballistic missiles. The United States should similarly force China to take on difficult military problems—problems that take considerable time and resources to respond to—and make fewer resources available for challenging the United States and its allies.

During the Cold War, America's investment in a manned penetrating bomber forced the Soviet Union to likewise invest considerable resources in air defenses, thereby denying those resources to more offensive purposes.<sup>31</sup> Today, China is forcing the United States to invest in costly measures to defend itself against China's ballistic missile arsenal,

whereas China has not had to contend with a similar threat.

More broadly, the current pattern of Chinese military modernization—stressing maritime, aerospace, and cyber capabilities—is a strategic luxury for Beijing. It reflects China’s assessment that it can—for the foreseeable future—dominate its continental “near abroad,” which has been the source of greatest threat in the past. There is a huge return to be had by re-imposing the traditional costs of continental security on Beijing.

The United States and its allies should increase their ability to strike deep into Chinese territory from a distance. As an example, it should continue to develop the Conventional Prompt Global Strike system and consider developing a submarine-launched conventional ballistic missile. The United States should also field the Next-Generation Bomber to provide a flexible, global strike capability. It should likewise seriously consider whether continuing to abide by the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty’s global ban on the deployment of conventional ballistic and cruise missiles of intermediate range (500-5,500 kilometers) is in the best interests of the United States.

By bolstering its ability to strike precisely at a distance, the United States will not only strengthen deterrence, but also force Beijing to increase its investments in active and passive defenses. China’s resources are as limited as those of the United States—investments in defensive capabilities represent resources that will not be available for offensive arms.

As a complement to its long-term peacetime competition strategy, the United States and its allies must seek to convince China that it cannot win a quick regional war. This, in turn, requires the United States to prepare to do three things.

First, the United States must posture itself to avoid quick defeat; otherwise, it could tempt an aggressor

into launching a first strike in the hopes of crippling America’s ability to respond. The United States relies heavily on forward-based forces not only for assurance and deterrence, but also for war-fighting. As noted above, these forces are increasingly vulnerable. However, the United States should not pull back from the region. To do so would undermine its ability to reassure allies and to deter potential aggressors.

Rather, the United States needs to both shift the balance between forward-based and deployable forces and to ensure that forward-based forces are more resilient. Such moves will strengthen deterrence by keeping the PLA from believing that it can win a quick victory through a first strike.

Second, given the scope and magnitude of Chinese military modernization, it is increasingly unlikely that any war involving China would be a short one (unless a rapid decisive operation by China forced the quick capitulation by the United States, or one of its allies, or coalition partners). Instead, it is likely that any such conflict would be protracted and costly. The United States needs to prepare for such an outcome—this includes ensuring military stocks are sufficient for a protracted conflict and likewise entails reviving mobilization planning. Preparedness to wage and win a long war will further strengthen deterrence by demonstrating the inadvisability of a first strike against the United States.

The United States and its allies should confront China with the prospect that a war in Asia would involve many states from the beginning of a conflict. Moreover, one of the most powerful ways to deter a conflict with China may be to convince Beijing leadership that it would face a war in multiple theaters rather than one confined to the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. The ability to compromise China’s sea lines of communication, for example, might prove a potent deterrent.



## Acquiring Capabilities

For the US military, these tasks may seem daunting. It must prepare for a peacetime competition requiring ongoing on-station presence, deterrence, and reassurance capabilities. It must also plan for major contingencies, most immediately in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula. To deter and, if necessary, defeat China in a contingency, the US military would need to, for example, break a prospective blockade around Taiwan, demine waters near the Taiwan Strait and in the East China Sea, conduct wide-area antisubmarine warfare and offensive mining, neutralize portions of China's C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance), and possibly hit large numbers of maritime and force-enabling PLA targets such as over-the-horizon radar and space-based surveillance.

Some of the capabilities needed to perform such missions barely exist in the US arsenal or have eroded to the point of irrelevancy. The United States has hardly any minesweepers in its fleet, is highly dependent on Japan for air-based antisubmarine warfare (ASW), is facing a tactical aircraft shortfall (both stealth and nonstealth), and has done little to make its tactical aircraft more survivable and dispersed in the face of China's precision-strike complex.

Maintaining the ability to fight and win wars will remain crucial to enhancing assurance and deterrence. US forces should be capable of engaging in two almost simultaneous conflict scenarios, and America's arsenal needs to be sizable enough to cope with stressful scenarios. For example, there should be enough SSNs to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and strike missions in East and Southeast Asian waters.

Aegis cruisers and destroyers should be able to provide simultaneous ballistic missile defense for




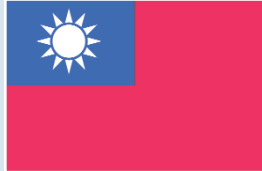
Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. US naval air and missile defenses should be enhanced and the fleet enlarged sufficiently to allow the US Navy to project air power across China's maritime frontier while being able to do so simultaneously in another theater. The United States needs sufficient numbers of survivable air platforms to allow it to sustain an initial missile salvo and to penetrate PLA airspace. Finally, the US Marine Corps should maintain a Marine Expeditionary Unit in the East and South China Seas for speedy insertion into partner nations under attack.

Given the increasing possibility of surprise attack and escalation in the Asia-Pacific region, the US military must possess the ability both to deter vertical escalation with nuclear forces and to horizontally escalate by, for example, carrying out distant blockades in the Indian Ocean and strategic maritime straits. This imperative puts great stress on the US Navy, which must be able to conduct interdiction operations far afield while operating in defense of Taiwan, Japan, or other states closer to China's shores.

Central to any successful strategy will be strengthening partnerships with allied and friendly states. The United States is not the only state in the region that has reason to be concerned with the changing Asia-Pacific military balance. Other powers have in fact already begun to respond. The United States needs to work closely with these powers to forge an integrated and effective response.

There are a number of things in particular that Japan should do to enhance deterrence in the Western Pacific (see table 2). First, it can ensure that its airfields and other key facilities are survivable and hardened against attack. Second, the United States and Japan should collectively explore new arrangements to ensure greater access to Japanese airfields and ports for both US forces as well as the Japan

TABLE 2  
EXPANDING PARTNER CONTRIBUTIONS

	<p><b>Japan</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harden facilities</li> <li>• Expand antisubmarine warfare capabilities</li> <li>• Deploy antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs) on Ryukyu Islands</li> <li>• Develop new partnerships to add strategic ballast and resilience (for example, with Australia, India, South Korea)</li> </ul>
	<p><b>South Korea</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enlarge ground forces</li> <li>• Harden airfields</li> <li>• Invest in counter-special forces, counter-artillery capabilities (for example, directed energy)</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Australia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host American forces in Australia</li> <li>• Increase undersea cooperation with the United States and others</li> <li>• Develop a long-range precision strike</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Taiwan</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pursue offensive-defensive capabilities mix</li> <li>• Harden airfields</li> <li>• Invest in ASCMs and diesel submarines</li> </ul>

SOURCE: Authors

Self-Defense Force (JSDF). Such arrangements could involve increasing Japanese military and civilian access to US bases in exchange for greater US and JSDF access to Japan's civilian ports and airfields.

Third, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force has considerable expertise in antisubmarine warfare, and it should continue to nurture and expand that expertise. Japan should follow through with the 2011 National Defense Program Guidelines' call for an expansion of Japanese submarine forces, and Tokyo should also modernize its fleet of ASW aircraft.

Fourth, Japan's geography would allow it to serve as a barrier to Chinese naval expansion. Japan should follow through with the decision—outlined in the National Defense Program Guidelines—to deploy anti-ship cruise missiles on its southern islands.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, Japan should expand existing partnerships, including those with Australia and India, and should also forge new ones. Tokyo should likewise improve its military-to-military relationship with Seoul. Tokyo's recent decision to loosen restrictions on arms cooperation and exports opens the door to creating new relationships. The recent agreement between Japan and Great Britain to cooperate on weapons development is a good step in this direction.

South Korea similarly has opportunities to enhance deterrence on the Korean Peninsula and to prepare for the possibility of instability there. Seoul must brace for the prospect of renewed North Korean aggression as Kim Jong-un consolidates his rule. Measures to fortify South Korea against North Korean coercion would include hardening air bases

against attack and investing in counterartillery and counter-Special Operations Forces capabilities. At the same time, the military requirements that would flow from the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang would be daunting.<sup>33</sup> This suggests that Seoul should reconsider its plans to reduce the size of the Republic of Korea Army.

Over the longer term, Seoul should plan to assume a broader regional role. The South Korean military distinguished itself in its deployment to northern Iraq, and it can play a more active role closer to home as well.

Australia, which has an impressive military for a middle-power nation, could play a substantial role in deterring Chinese aggression. Australian forces have fought side-by-side with American troops in every war since World War I. Moreover, Canberra, Australia has deployed its forces far from the Asia-Pacific region. However, the changing military balance in the region suggests that Canberra will face a tougher security environment closer to home.

A 2009 white paper by the Australian Department of Defense recognized this tougher security environment and called for, among other things, the modernization and expansion of Australia's attack submarine fleet.<sup>34</sup> Australian defense analysts have called on the Australian government to do even more. For example, Ross Babbage of the Kokoda Foundation has asked the Australian government to acquire a fleet of twelve nuclear-powered attack submarines, to develop conventionally armed ballistic and cruise missiles, and to increase Australia's investment in cyber warfare.<sup>35</sup>

Australia could take a number of steps that would both increase its ability to respond to threats unilaterally as well as greatly enhance an alliance response in conjunction with the United States. Canberra should, for example, increase its undersea cooperation with the United States and other Pacific players. The recent revision of Japan's policy on arms cooperation—for example—opens the possibility of Australian cooperation with Japan, which deploys some of the world's best attack submarines. The United States should work with Australia to ensure that whatever

submarine Canberra selects to replace the Collins-class boats represents a step forward in interoperability with the United States. In addition, Australia should develop and deploy long-range precision strike systems to hold at-risk forces that threaten Australia.

Taiwan, for its part, could do much more than it has to enable itself to resist Chinese military coercion. Taipei, Taiwan, should seek to harden key military infrastructure—including its airfields and command and control nodes—against Chinese missile and air attacks. In addition, Taipei should invest in systems such as antiship cruise missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, diesel submarines, and mine-laying capabilities that will allow it to inflict costs on China, deter an amphibious attack, and protract a conflict.

The Philippines has neglected fortifying its defenses for far too long. Its capital of Manila has seen the result of this neglect as China has sought to bully the Philippines over its territorial claims in the South China Sea. The United States should help build the Philippines's capacity for self-defense. Particularly important in this regard would be enhancing the ability of the Philippines to protect its territorial waters, enhance its marine forces for dislodgement and base protection, and become part of a wide ocean surveillance network.

In a period of limited and increasingly constrained defense resources, the United States needs to be looking for defense options that promise especially high leverage in the context of the changing military balance in the Asia-Pacific region. Four such options stand out: developing a coalition ISR network in the Western Pacific, bolstering allied undersea warfare, expanding the range of bases open to the United States, and enhancing nuclear deterrence.

### **A Coalition ISR Network for the Western Pacific**

In light of the changing military balance in the Western Pacific, it makes sense for the United States to seek new ways of reassuring its allies and friends and generating collective responses to crisis and

aggression. An ISR network represents a promising approach to do just this. The United States has deployed Global Hawk high-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Guam, although the Obama administration's recent decision to cancel the Global Hawk Block 30 program moving forward seems particularly problematic for the Asian theater.

Moreover, a growing number of US allies and partners in the region are interested in acquiring new ISR assets. According to press reports, a number of states in the region are interested in acquiring high-altitude long-endurance UAVs. Also, key allies are interested in increasing their maritime and aerial situational awareness in the region. Australia, for example, is exploring the use of the Cocos Islands for maritime air patrol and surveillance activities as part of its ongoing force posture review.<sup>36</sup>

Although information-sharing agreements exist between the United States and its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region, most are bilateral. By contrast, an ISR architecture would be open to all: states would contribute ISR assets and would in return receive the common operating picture the network generated.

A coalition ISR architecture in the Western Pacific would have several advantages. First, it would provide the United States, its regional allies, and partners a common picture of activity in the Western Pacific. Such a shared understanding may be a necessary precondition to collective action. Second, such an approach could represent a significant deterrent to hostile action—it would make it more difficult for an aggressor to act without being caught, and an attack on the network would amount to an attack on all its members.

### **Allied Undersea Warfare Cooperation**

The United States has enjoyed a hard-earned comparative advantage in undersea warfare for decades. More importantly, the United States is fortunate to have as allies nations such as Great Britain, Japan, Australia, and Canada, which also have highly capable

undersea forces. The United States should strive to ensure that it and its Pacific allies retain their comparative advantage in undersea warfare.

America should, for example, encourage Canberra to develop the shore infrastructure necessary for US nuclear attack submarines to operate out of or rotate through Australian bases south of Perth and in Brisbane.<sup>37</sup> The United States should also facilitate cooperation with and among Asian states with diesel submarines and develop cooperative expertise in antisubmarine warfare. Offering to develop increasingly capable unmanned undersea vehicles with close allies would likewise be advantageous. Finally, the United States should offer to lease or sell Virginia-class SSNs to Australia to replace the aging Collins-class attack submarines.

### **Expanded Basing Options**

Bases are a crucial element of US strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. They are a central pillar of US presence, reassurance, and deterrence in the region. That said, the risk to US forward-based forces is clearly increasing. In the future, the United States needs to balance the operational risk to its forces with the strategic risk of pulling back from the region. A balanced approach to basing should include hardening existing bases against attack. This is particularly important at main operating locations such as Andersen Air Base on Guam and Kadena Air Base in Japan. The United States should invest in hardened shelters as well as rapid runway repair kits for each of its major bases in the Asia-Pacific theater. As noted earlier, hardening existing bases should be complemented by an expansion of the US basing network in the Asia-Pacific region. Finally, the United States should also invest in an expeditionary basing capability.

### **An 'Asia-First' Nuclear Deterrent**

A full description of the emerging requirements for US global nuclear deterrence is beyond the scope of

this paper.<sup>38</sup> However, three trends are unmistakable: (1) the number of nuclear-armed states is rising significantly; (2) almost all of the contemporary nuclear modernization is being done by Asian states; and (3) the United States retains a backward-looking nuclear strategy and an aging arsenal.

The United States needs to recalculate its deterrence and other elements of its nuclear posture in light of the changing global nuclear balance. There is no longer a single “balance of terror” with the Soviet Union but an emerging multipolar balance that will be inherently less stable if perhaps less devastatingly destructive than an all-out Cold War nuclear exchange.

Not only is China modernizing, as related above, but so are other Asian states—these range from highly unstable and unpredictable actors like Pakistan and Iran to potential US strategic partners such as India. Other developed and developing states have the capacity—be it financial, technical, or both—to

become nuclear powers on short notice. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia depend on America’s extended nuclear deterrent, but might hedge their bets as the balance shifts.

Nuclear issues in the United States—particularly in the Obama administration—remain the preserve of arms control and other specialists who retain a Cold War mindset focused on Russia or who maintain hopes for a nuclear-free world. Yet the need for a robust deterrent—that is, any deterrent posture beyond a minimum existential deterrent of relatively few systems with massively destructive warheads—has not diminished in the post-Cold War years. While further analysis would be required to conceptualize a more useful US nuclear force for this emerging nuclear balance, the current US forces and trajectory of policy are inadequate. Given the overall shift in US strategy, defining an “Asia-First” deterrent would provide a better point of departure than the current “Russia-First” focus.

## Conclusion

The United States faces challenging times ahead in the Asia-Pacific region. The rise of China and Chinese military modernization—combined with constraints on the US defense budget—mean that in coming years, US forces are likely to face increased operational risk and that the strategic risk to US interests will be compounded. It will take greater effort and more defense resources for the United States to protect its historic interests in the region. The failure to adjust the structure and posture of US forces in the region threatens to open up a widening gap between America's capabilities and commitments.

There is quite simply no need to accept a narrower conceptualization of the American role in the

world, and this is particularly true when it comes to America's role in the Asia-Pacific region, a part of the globe that will undoubtedly shape America's future peace and prosperity. The United States has the power to field forces that will safeguard US interests at an acceptable level of risk. This report has outlined a series of steps that the United States should take to achieve that aim. What will be required first and foremost is the political will to explain not just the costs but also the benefits of a vigorous US role in the Asia-Pacific region, to seek adequate funding for an enhanced US presence there, and to work with US allies and partners in the region to make that posture a reality.



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33. Bruce W. Bennett and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 84-119.
34. Recent defense budget cuts have, however, called into question the force structure plans outlined in the white paper. See Australian Government Department of Defense, "Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030" (Canberra, Australia, 2009), [www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence\\_white\\_paper\\_2009.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf) (accessed May 4, 2012).

35. Ross Babbage, *Australia's Strategic Edge in 2030* (Canberra: Kokoda Foundation, 2010).

36. US Department of Defense, *Australian Defence Force Posture Review: Initial Assessments against the Review's Terms of Reference*, Attachment C (Washington, DC), [www.defence.gov.au/oscdf/adf-posture-review/docs/interim/AttachC.pdf](http://www.defence.gov.au/oscdf/adf-posture-review/docs/interim/AttachC.pdf) (accessed May 1, 2012).

37. Ibid.

38. For a fuller discussion, see Thomas Donnelly and David Trachtenberg, "Toward a New "New Look:" U.S. Nuclear Strategy and Forces for the Third Atomic Age," CDS Working Paper (March 2012), [www.aei.org/files/2010/03/01/Toward-a-New-New-Look-final.pdf](http://www.aei.org/files/2010/03/01/Toward-a-New-New-Look-final.pdf).

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